

**Written Statement of Chief Steven Bell
Battalion Chief, Augusta Fire Department
before the
Subcommittee on Railroads,
Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure,
U.S. House of Representatives
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Good morning, my name is Steven Bell, and I am a Battalion Chief for the Augusta, Georgia Fire Department. I would like to start off by thanking Chairman Steven LaTourette and Ranking Member Corrine Brown for holding this important hearing. I also want to thank Congressman John Barrow for inviting me to testify here today.

For the past 31 years, I have been employed as a firefighter and first responder. My tenure began in the mid 70's. However, it wasn't until the early 80's that we began to realize that a specialized group of firefighters was needed to handle any incident that might occur in the industrial or transportation fields in Augusta. Prior to the early 80's, the only hazardous materials we worried about were gasoline, natural and propane gas. The only tools we had at our disposal to deal with hazardous materials incident were water, foam, hand held fire extinguishers, and an assortment of natural gas line plugs.

In 1985 a few firefighters began the up hill battle of forming our first hazmat team. Any equipment that was obtained came by way of donations from our local industry. Today our hazmat team consists of 23 members. We also have two custom-built hazmat units; level A, B and C suits, patch kits and other equipment.

Our training and equipment were put to the test on January 6, 2005, when a freight train carrying chemicals hit a parked train near an Avondale Mills plant in Graniteville, South Carolina. The impact caused poisonous chlorine gas to leak from three of the moving train's cars. More than 5,000 people were evacuated from the site and nine people were killed.

I was on duty at the time of the Graniteville accident. The Graniteville-Vaucluse-Warrenton Volunteer Fire Department initially responded to the accident. They were not aware that the accident caused a chlorine leak. Approximately 25 minutes after the initial response, our hazmat team was requested to assist in this incident. Our 911 center contacted my office by phone. The 911 dispatcher relayed all of her information to me. However, the information was not clear. Our first action was to assemble a team at one of our two-hazmat stations. After we obtained as much information as possible we requested that a member of the Graniteville-Vaucluse-Warrenton Volunteer Fire Department to meet with us several miles away from the site. This enabled us to gather more first hand information. After this meeting with the Graniteville-Vaucluse-Warrenton Fire Department representative, I knew that this would not be the typical hazmat incident. The initial response from our department consisted of the following: hazmat units (six team members with an additional six on stand by), one battalion chief, the special operations

chief and our Emergency Management Agency director who now serves as the fire chief of the Augusta Fire Department. Graniteville-Vaucluse-Warrenville resources are limited and it became apparent that much more was going to be needed.

Our department supplied personnel at the scene for two weeks. Not only did we assist in the planning aspect of the response, we also had direct involvement in seeing that these action plans were implemented.

I hope that an accident similar to the one in Graniteville does not happen in one of the cities you represent. While I don't want anyone to have to deal with a hazardous materials accident, I do think that the federal government has an important role to play ensuring that our nation's emergency responders are properly trained and properly equipped to respond to incidents, such as the accident in Graniteville, involving hazardous materials. Specifically, 1.) more funding should be provided for training, 2.) firefighters need to receive the appropriate levels of training, and 3.) new tools should be developed to better identify hazardous cargo.

While the safety of emergency responders can be fully guaranteed, the number of those injured or killed as a result of exposure to hazardous materials can be significantly impacted through hazardous materials training. Training is not only necessary for new recruits, it is also essential to provide refresher training to all first responders to ensure their ongoing safety. Additional funding is needed to ensure that all firefighters who respond to an incident involving hazardous materials be prepared to respond appropriately and safely.

First responders not only need training in area of hazmat response, we need exceptional training. There are training facilities that provide hands-on training such as the Transportation Technology Center in Pueblo, Colorado. Through the generous sponsorship of the CSX Railroad I was provided with the opportunity to attend a week long course in March of 2005. The main emphasis was on rail cars especially the various tank cars. Even though I serve in a position in which I no longer work in a hot zone, this week long class allowed everyone to become familiar with one another and our duties at an incident. This alone is priceless. We must work as a team and courses like this build confidence with one another. Classroom work + hands on training + applying this training to a practical exercise = a formula for the safest and most effect resolution to a hazmat incident.

Unfortunately, most first responders are not afforded this same opportunity due to restricted budgets. We owe a lot of thanks to Norfolk and CSX for providing a way for some of this country's first responders to attend these courses. In my opinion, providing the opportunity for more first responders to attend this type of training is money well spent. I think that the federal government should assist local communities to provide this type of training to their firefighters.

Another excellent example of the sort of training that should be expanded upon is the hazardous materials training program offered by the International Association of Fire

Fighters (IAFF). Using instructors who are both certified fire service instructors and certified hazmat responders, the IAFF offers, free of charge, real-world training in local communities that few institutions can match.

This brings me to my second point, firefighters need to receive the appropriate levels of training. It is extremely important that emergency responders are trained at a level appropriate to their response. Department of Labor regulations identify five different levels of hazmat emergency response training: Awareness, Operations, Hazmat Technician, Hazmat Specialist, and On-Scene Incident Commander. Unfortunately, the level of training that is currently provided in many states and localities is at the “awareness” level. This training is inadequate to prepare firefighters to respond to a hazmat call. Awareness training is intended for employees at facilities where hazardous substances are present, and is intended to 1.) train such employees to recognize potential releases of a hazardous substance and 2.) initiate a response sequence by contacting the appropriate emergency response entity, such as the local fire department.

All firefighters should, at a minimum, be trained at the “operations” level. Operations level training is designed for individuals who respond to releases or potential releases of hazardous substances to “protect nearby persons, property, and the environment from the effects of the release.” They are trained to contain the release from a safe distance, keep it from spreading and prevent exposures. Clearly, this is the minimum level at which firefighters should be trained.

Finally, as the Graniteville train accident proves, timely and accurate information are key to any successful emergency response, and this is especially important on a hazmat call. Without the ability to quickly and accurately identify hazardous cargo, firefighters may lack the necessary information to properly respond to a hazmat incident; an improper response could result in injury or even death of both firefighters and civilians.

Placards identifying hazardous materials on rail cars are important and life-saving tools that help provide firefighters with the information they need to properly respond, and they are essential for first responders to quickly and easily obtain the information they need to assess a scene. However, new technologies should be examined to see how they may best be utilized to supplement placards and enhance the ability of first responders to properly respond to incidents involving hazardous materials.

I thank you again for the opportunity to appear before you today. I would be pleased to answer any questions.